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AN ASPECT OF THE WORK OF THE TEACHER OF ENGLISH

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How shall one dare to rephrase any of the smooth-worn generalizations about the function of the school: to say, for instance, that the definition of education today is not information, nor knowledge, nor intellectual development; or that, though the time has passed for worshiping intellectual training with sacrifice of body and soul, the time for intellectual training has not passed? Lamentable platitudes these, and impertinent withal, unless there is some danger that, in our present elaborate correlating of school with home, church, and every other institution for the education of the young, we fail to discriminate the essential function of each. If there is this danger, we must put up with platitudes until we see that the high school has something to give which not the best of homes, or the best of churches, or elementary schools, or colleges, or business experience can give so well, and that the "peculiar difference" may be no newer thing than this: the task of showing to young people of medium opportunities—not the masses that stop with the grammar school, nor the picked band that goes on to college—how much power and profit, joy and light, lies in the conscious workings of their own minds; of opening for them, in a word, the door of the intellect upon the beauty and interest of life. It is the object of this paper to make clear the bearing of such a conception of the high school on certain problems of the English work.

For one thing, it clears off with one sweep all mean and mediocre literature. The business of the English teacher is to make attractive the genuinely good, which is to say, the thing that makes appeal, not only to right feelings, but to just thinking, that is itself artistically right. Let E. P. Roe's immaculate morality shine as it may, he is not for these uses; and with him must go—out from the sanction of consciousness of the English classroom, it is understood—many a

book, not vicious and not unbeloved by the young folk, only common and poor by literary standards. So with other matters more or less intimately connected with the English work—the presentation of a play, for instance, the program of a literary society. Nothing could be of better value to the study of English than the acting of a play, provided that it be a good play.

It is fortunate that there is a great deal of the genuinely good, for the specific against failure in making it attractive is variety. Hence the need of an open list, a free career, so to speak, through Scott and Chaucer, the *Arabian Nights* and the Old Testament, *Gulliver's Travels* and the *Pilgrim's Progress*, the *Iliad* and *Fuzzy Wuzzy*, not to speak of the various combinations of goodness and attractiveness in our best periodicals, which should be within the reach of every pupil in every school. Why, in theory, should one first-year class like what its predecessor liked, or one teacher butcher the enthusiasms of another or tarnish her own with too much handling, or a certain sequence within the year be as a law of the Medes and Persians?

Here some practical difficulties put up their heads. Let us pass, as wearisome but manageable, all those connected with the mechanism of the program. In the general plan of the year's work, provision must of course be made for certain points of contact between classes, and a definite understanding reached about divergences. A more interesting consideration lies behind the constant cry of the English teacher, "No time!" Is there any legitimate objection, on the plea of scant time, to very great variety in the number of books assigned for the year's reading?

Obviously not. The teacher can handle any reasonable course of reading—ten books a school year, say, or five books—so as but to benefit his pupils and himself by the changing and freshening of his method of attack. For instance, say he has five books assigned, and half the time of the class for reading them—that means four weeks a book; if ten is the number specified, he has two weeks. He ought to be able to get the juice of the book out either way—not to wring it dry, of course, even if he could or would, but to get, with more or less detail, some single, definite, harmonious impression. Oral composition, properly manipulated, will draw this out; written composition will; so will class reading—and so on, one method being more

expeditious than a second, a second than a third. And over and over again, as all know, the least promising method brings the best results.

Then, there's the terrible bugbear the college entrance requirements, with all the talk of their restrictive and benumbing grip upon the high schools. Are the best plans of high-school teachers crippled by the call of the colleges for intensive study of certain masterpieces? After all, there are the masterpieces. And, besides, do the colleges not want, in literature and in composition, what the high schools want to give anyhow? Their representatives say that they want the pupil to have something to say and some definite idea of how to go about saying it. Here, as everywhere else, the *test* of fitness must be coherent expression. This, it would seem, must be based on the power to discriminate, as between the recounting of an incident and an explanation of it, between an explanation and a plea, a plea and a precept, or, chief of all, between a whole thing, large or small, and a fraction of a whole, which last matter will include the understanding of the nature of paragraphs and sentences singly or in groups. Again, bare intelligibility demands correctness in certain details, settles the question of insistence on commas and apostrophes, spelling, and decent reading. The point is simply this: College preparation isn't justly a special and conflicting responsibility upon the high-school teacher; whatever is best for the high-school pupil is best for this subordinate end.

All of which argues for a most plentiful lack of dogmatism in regard to variety of material and treatment. Yet, and consistently, our so-called secondary education might well be more closely girt. Accuracy and breadth of information, patient zeal in acquiring it, a well-stored memory, and a well-trained reason—these things are not beyond us average folk. They are the scholar's earmarks; they are also the earmarks of efficient workers in every calling on earth.

It follows that one of the best tools in the English workshop is the study of the larger structural features of both literary masterpieces and the pupil's own work. How can it be otherwise? The material of the study of English is, quite as truly as of zoölogy or botany, life—that is, it is expression by means of words of the experience of life. But this material lies all around the pupil, in books and out of them, outside the classroom. How, then, can the classroom

prove any particular right to be? It must gather in, as has been shown, a copious but discriminated mass, and then it must show, in such fashion and to such extent as can be grasped by the mind addressed, how a master makes his meanings clear, and therefore how *we*—pupil, teacher, and the rest of us—may make our meanings clear.

Against this theory, it is true, objectors are wont to advance two precepts. Take care of the thought, they say, and the form will take care of itself; and again, put nothing, particularly not yourself, between the author and the pupil. The first is on its face an absurdity; the second, a matter of course, but a reason for the study of form. For how else, pray, can the author show his meaning than through the form he chooses for it? And how else can the teacher eliminate himself than by letting the author have his say through the medium he has chosen? And when is the teacher more glaringly and definitively in the way than when he is pointing out, or causing the pupil to point out, random features that seem to him attractive or noteworthy? It's largely because we don't entirely grasp his form, down to the last exquisite detail of it, that we never do fully know a great master's meaning—facts we euphemistically confess and dodge by saying that his masterpiece never tires us—and, of course, it is but little of his form that the high-school babe will get; but the two can't be separated. That the teacher sometimes tries is the reason that he sometimes gets nowhere with a great book, and that the pupil gets just a general impression of teacher—lovely or awful, as the case may be—and none at all of what he, or the author either, has to do with it. Let him read *Macbeth*, for instance, and wonder over the witches, and puzzle over Banquo's shadowy virtue, and argue whether Lady Macbeth is a worse villain than her husband, and find out that the English king is Edward the Confessor, and agree that old Siward is heroic and inspiring—and where is the meaning of *Macbeth*?

It follows, of course, that he's at sea when he tries for himself, and he can't respond at all to the idea of ordering his stuff after one fashion if he means one thing, and after quite another if he means something else. On the other hand, give him but the thread, and he loves the unraveling of a great piece of art, and having unraveled, can in some fashion construct—and this is a keener pleasure

still, this conscious effort to give fit array to an idea of his own. Words will come, they do come—words with blood in them, and sentences with joints and sinews—for such service as this; and behold, he has gained the power to write and to speak, with his mind on his subject, not on himself.

No one will deny, however, a danger—nonessential to the study of form, but actual—that the teacher's work of directing appreciation may check spontaneity and obscure the light. This, is indeed, one of the chief problems of the English teacher. The best resource against it is what may perhaps be called the third essential device of method—oral composition. There are signs that the extraordinary potentialities of this phase of English work are beginning to be recognized in the high schools. No other sort of work better illustrates the necessity, just pleaded, of care for form on the one hand, for variety and excellence of material on the other. For, unbridled, unplanned, it runs with amazing speed into mere babble and gush, and, without plenty of provender to feed on, it dries into a weazened thing indeed. On the other hand, it would be only a very crude teacher who would so pile up restrictions as to extinguish the pupil's natural joy in telling people something he thinks he knows; and the number of subjects, closed utterly to the pupil's power of manipulation in writing, but perfectly approachable by this method, is matter of daily fresh discovery and delight. An impromptu list of ways of using oral composition found by experiment to be practicable and helpful, contains the following numbers: (1) the recounting, section by section, of the whole, story or text, as preliminary to detailed study; (2) the reproduction as brief but complete wholes of incidents from books read in class, or brought in from outside reading or experience; (3) descriptions, ditto; (4) adaptations of above material with original variations; (5) dialogues constructed as in 4; (6) summaries of articles in periodicals, as President Thwing's papers on athletics; (7) reports on how to gather material from scattered sources; as how to use Poole's *Index*; (8) impromptu criticisms of themes and other class work.

With such opportunities, and with the need there is for the pressing home of every one of them, it is no wonder that English teachers want more time and credit for their work. There are other good

reasons why they should have it. One of the most substantial difficulties of English teachers—bequeathed to them, it is true, by a former generation, but still in a green old age—is the very imperfect knowledge on the part of the public of what English teaching means, and a distinct tendency to belittle its efficacy. Quite apart from the question of the intrinsic value of English, an increase of time and credit allotted to the study would doubtless do something to enhance its dignity. When Latin, German, and French have five credits, why should English have only four, except for the reason that it is of less importance? So the general public will not illogically argue. And the fact is, as things have been until not so very long ago, English *is* of less importance—that is, without a very clear conception on the part of teachers of what the high school is, and of what English is in the high school, English instruction becomes, from the nature of the material and the circumstances, so fluid, various, chameleon-like, that no definite claim can be made good for it. The difficulties that spring from popular misapprehension and ignorance, then, can be cleared only by removing the sources of that misapprehension; but the official recognition in the shape of five credits would be, no less, a useful implement in the work.

The demands of this work upon the teacher are obvious. For one thing, it takes for granted in the individual a high standard of scholarly attainments—an essential of his qualification, by the way, one often hears belittled, and oftener still sees discouraged in the grinding progress of the school routine. Again, it calls, as has been suggested, for intelligent and sympathetic co-operation on the part of the teaching body. It is not too much to say that the high school languishes, in some measure, for a larger common life among its teachers. They ought to be a communistic brotherhood, inspired each one with the lofty determination to get for himself all the good that is in any wise to be extracted or detached from the others. Calculable progress in this direction must be slow; it is bought with much sacrifice; but until it is bought there can be no common spirit, no common ideals, no problems can be permanently solved, and the professional intercourse of teachers will continue to be restricted to bewailings of their difficulties and exaltings of their individual preferences.

In brief review of the purpose of this paper: Its conception of the high-school English course implies, that the high school trains its large body of young people of medium opportunities to appreciate, and to use for pleasure and profit, the powers of their own minds, and holds high before them the intellectual virtues of enthusiasm for knowledge and painstaking accuracy in acquiring it; that the first care of the high school is this, whatever it may also be able to do in the way of "mothering" its pupils, providing for their social amusement and aggrandizement, physical improvement, or moral reconstruction; that such an ideal presupposes for its realization, for one thing, a reasoned plan of work, broad yet definite, since based on the requirements of the growing mind, and, for another, teachers individually of good scholarly attainments and ambition, and collectively a united organization, or rather, an organism breathing the very inmost spirit of their common task; that such unanimity achieved, some difficulties, such as the working out of due proportion of time and emphasis on different features of the work, and the attendant problem of a special preparation for a college course, will come to seem apparent rather than real, since it will be seen that, whatever the form of the requirement, the reality demanded of the high-school student is the same: a grasp of the identifying features of the subject, within or without a book; the power to recognize, analyze, and construct, in elementary but consistent fashion, a whole composition, as a narrative, an explanation, a paragraph, a sentence; such reasonable correctness and ease in the details of speech and writing—spelling, punctuation, reading—as will enable him to manifest these larger powers; not nice appreciation of literary values or refinement of expression; that other difficulties of more general nature, such as the popular misapprehension of the scope and importance of the study of English, with its attendant evils, may gradually be vanquished; finally, that the best results of the English classroom seem to be connected with (1) the use of great variety of material—uniform only in its exclusion of poor stuff and matter unsuitable to the needs of the boy and girl for whom it is selected, (2) fearless emphasizing of the larger structural elements in literature and composition, with (3) generous dependence on ordered exercises in oral composition.